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Carol X Weakley 10/11/2006 04:33:35 PM From DB/Inbox: Carol X Weakley

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DISSEMINATION: POL

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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6856

INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 004002

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/11/2011

TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR IS LE SY IR IZ

SUBJECT: ISRAELI ACADEMICS OFFER POST-LEBANON WAR

PERSPECTIVES

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Gene A. Cretz. E.O. 12958 Reason 1.4 (B/D).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Charge, Political Counselor and PAO recently discussed Israeli politics and regional developments in the aftermath of the Lebanon war with leading academics and area experts from Israeli universities and think tanks. These academics, who spoke to us under the Chatham House rule of confidentiality, included several from the generally more liberal Tel Aviv (TAU) and Haifa universities as well as conservative opinion-shapers from Bar-Ilan University (BIU) and the more centrist Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzliya and Ben Gurion University in the Negev. While only some of our interlocutors were proponents of Prime Minister Olmert's unilateral policy of "convergence" before the Lebanon war, most agreed that it is a dead letter now. Despite differences of opinion on what GOI policymakers should do now-- the left favors a search for cease-fire and making law and order demands of the PA while the right favors a "conflict management" approach -- these Israeli interlocutors were in general agreement that the Israeli body politic has no stomach for a "grand bargain" or a permanent status agreement at this time. Most academics agreed with TAU Dayan Center Head Asher Susser and Bitter Lemons Editor Yossi Alpher that the Lebanon war was a proxy war between Israel and Iran that marked a paradigm shift in the balance of power in the Middle East: the new regional powers are now all non-Arab states: Iran, Turkey, Israel (and the U.S.). Most hoped the U.S. would halt Iranian inroads in the Shi'a crescent, but others were critical of U.S. policy in the region. In the words of Alpher, "Israel is fighting on two fronts with groups (Hamas and Hezbollah) that won in elections (the U.S.) encouraged. We (Israel) paid the consequences of America's Arab reform policy." End Summary.

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¶12. (C) The Charge asked the academics why Israelis were so self-critical about the recent Lebanon war. TAU Jaffee Center Professor Mark Heller replied that Israelis are by nature critical observers who tend to focus on their failings rather than their successes. Nonetheless, Heller believed post-Lebanon low public opinion polls combined with allegations of improper real estate transactions against Olmert had created a crisis in confidence. Most responses echoed Heller's critique of the failure of Israel's leadership and politicians to inspire trust in the body politic, which has been alienated by a steady stream of reports of corruption, malfeasance and other improprieties. Others condemned the "confusion and hesitation" of the Prime Minister during the war, citing the lack of planning for civilian evacuation in the north and poor military planning as examples. Professor Arnon Sofer of Haifa University proclaimed that the only heroes in this summer's war were Israeli civilians, but another academic bemoaned the state of Israeli society as one that lacked a sense of civics and was unfamiliar with the world around it, including knowledge of the Arabic language. On a more upbeat note, Haifa University Professor Brenda Shaffer observed that the facts belied failure: the Israeli shekel had appreciated against the dollar, the price of oil had decreased, and Israel had taken the air out of Iran's sails by surviving the threat posed by Hizballah rockets. She noted that more Israeli civilians died from car accidents this summer than died in the conflict to hammer home this point.

Palestinian Options: Conflict Management or Cease-Fire?

¶13. (C) POL/C asked what the implications of the Lebanon war were on Olmert's options with the Palestinians. A chorus responded that the Prime Minister's policy of convergence/realignment (aka "hitkansut" in Hebrew) was a dead -- or frozen -- letter for the immediate future. Gerald Steinberg of BIU argued that disengagement policy in general was a failure, and argued in favor of "conflict management," a do-nothing-but-fight-terrorism approach on the Palestinian account seconded by several of his BIU colleagues. Those academics on the center-left who had been critical of the unilateral aspect of the Prime Minister's plan agreed with their conservative colleagues' assessment that a final status agreement is not attainable in the near future. Professor Asher Susser, for instance, argued that inaction -- i.e., watching the disintegration of the Palestinian Authority (PA) -- would be antithetical to an Israeli strategic interest in a Palestinian state. He urged a rethinking of the "ideological litmus test" that Israel and the USG now apply to the Hamas-run PA: "We speak to the PA as if we are pursuing final status talks with them. Applying an ideology test is only necessary when (the parties) are discussing end-of-conflict issues." Susser argued in favor of changing the litmus test we apply to the PA to one of maintaining law and order and a sustainable cease-fire (rather than the Quartet conditions). Professor Dan Bar-On of Ben Gurion University agreed on the importance of a cease-fire, adding that the chaos in Gaza is threatening to Israel: "Making progress with the Palestinians will decrease the influence of Iran and Al-Qaeda."

Paradigm Shift from the Palestinian Question to Iran

¶14. (C) The Charge asked the academics for their perspectives on the broader region after the Lebanon war. Professor Susser opined that the war was the first war by proxies between Israel and Iran rather than the latest in a string of Arab-Israeli wars. The Arab state system was in decline, and was being supplanted by the rise of non-Arab states in the region -- Israel, Iran and Turkey -- combined with the new role of non-state actors (e.g. Hizballah, Hamas). Yossi

Alpher, a former Mossad official, described this as a paradigm shift in focus from the Palestinian question to the Iranian one. Syria serves as the weak link in a Shi'a crescent that extends from Iran through Iraq to Lebanon, Alpher continued. In counterpoint, Dr. Efraim Kam, a TAU expert on Iran, noted that the bulk of Hizballah rockets fired on Israel were sourced to Syria -- only six rockets were Iranian in origin. He claimed that Iran had instructed Hizballah not to shell Tel Aviv out of concern that the conflict would spin out of control.

Iraq Makes Israelis Wary of Democratic reform

15. (C) Professor Shaffer, a foreign policy hawk from Haifa, commented that since there was no longer any hegemon to rein in Hizballah or Iran, we (U.S.) should pay more attention to the minorities in Iran as a possible lever for understanding how Iran works and perhaps to influence its behavior. She urged an active U.S.-Israeli effort to undermine the Iranian regime, including assassination of nuclear scientists and fomenting unrest among Iran's minority communities. Another academic asked how can Israel trust the U.S. with its security after the mess they (the Americans) have created in Iraq? This remark set off a brisk debate on the issue of democratic reform in the Middle East. In the words of Yossi Alpher, "Israel is fighting on two fronts with groups that won in elections (the U.S.) encouraged. We (Israel) paid the consequences of America's Arab reform policy." The Charge and Pol/C responded that change is inevitable in the Arab world. The PAO added that the U.S. has always stood up for democracy and that it is simplistic to say that the undemocratic Arab states in the region are stable.

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